

training its junior leaders for the challenges of the 21st Century.

*"Tactical decision games are to field training as stretching is to tough PT."*²

*"TDGs have captured the imagination of Marines who see their potential for freeing tactics from the dead hand of the laundry list."*³

What is a TDG?

Before discussing why armor units should conduct TDG training on a regular basis, we need to define the TDG. The TDG is a tactical problem consisting of a short written scenario, a sketch, a requirement, and a time limit. The *written scenario* tells the players who they are, what they have for assets, defines their mission, and presents some type of enemy situation. The enemy situation is usually vague and incomplete, forcing the players to make assumptions. The written scenario is usually no more than a few paragraphs.

The *sketch* allows the players to depict their graphics and present their plan to the group. The *requirement* is usually a written frag order to subordinate unit leaders. The *time limit* is normally less than ten minutes and is vital to the game since it provides the friction and pressure necessary to simulate combat.

At TBS, we gave TDGs to lieutenants after long hikes, after PT, after written tests, etc., anything to drive home the fact that in combat they will need to think and perform 24 hours a day. During the TDG, we played loud music, banged on trash cans (artillery), splashed water (rain), etc., anything to simulate the friction of combat. Once the time limit was up, the lieutenants presented their solutions to the group, under the direction of a controller or moderator. The moderator guided the critique by keeping the discussion focused on *why* the lieutenants made specific assumptions and decisions. Heated debates among the players were

healthy and encouraged, for this was where most of the learning took place.

Groups can play TDGs in a seminar or force-on-force format. In the seminar format, players should draw their sketch on a VGT so they can present their plan to the group on an overhead. Players should write their plan and brief their plan as a frag order, to practice communication skills and order-writing under pressure. The moderator can ask questions such as: What were your priorities? What reports would you send to higher? What assumptions did you make and why? What about fire support? What was your intent?

As with planning an attack, when one starts with actions on the objective and works backwards, a TDG starts with the decision and works backwards.⁴ This occurs through a detailed analysis of the decision *after* the game is over. Although the focus is normally on the planning process used to achieve a decision, TDGs force a decision up front. The group then thoroughly analyzes the decision during a detailed critique. This recognition or intuitive approach to decision-making, forced during TDG training, is just as important as the analytical approach, especially when making tactical, versus technical, decisions. Since junior leaders will use both approaches to make decisions in combat, armor schools and units should teach and practice both methods. Figures 1 and 2 are examples of TDGs:

Although there are some TDGs in print,⁵ Marine Corps' schools and units design most of their own TDGs. Designers should tailor the TDGs to the unit's goals, weaknesses, and training priorities. Scenarios should be realistic, challenging, and present some type of dilemma for the players. The scenarios

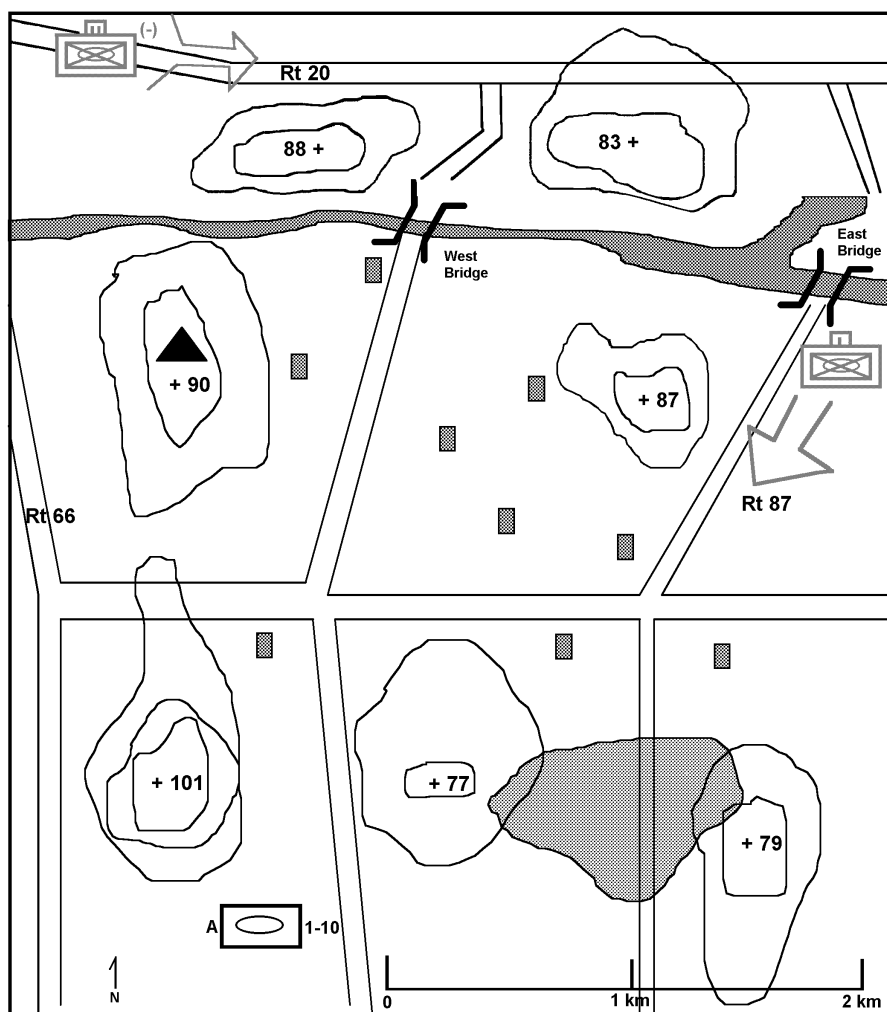


Figure 2

Situation: You are CO of Company A, TF 1-10 AR. You are the advance guard of the TF as it attacks north along Rt 66. The TF is approximately 5 km behind you, moving north along Rt 66 in a TF column. You have priority of FA and mortars, and there is one dismounted scout team in your zone on Hill 90. The rest of the TF scouts are screening forward and west of the task force. The enemy can mass up to battalion-size mech units, mainly consisting of T-72s and BMP-2s. As you approach Hill 77, you receive the following report from the OP on Hill 90: "Three T-72s and 6 BMPs have crossed East Bridge and are heading south along Rt 87. Also, there is a column of 20 vehicles moving west to east along Rt 20." What is your plan?

should read like a short story, complete with changing enemy situations, bad intelligence, poor communications, and lots of surprises. Designers can base scenarios on historical examples, combat or NTC experience, or tailor the scenario to focus on a specific teaching point, such as a principle of war or warfighting tenet. A good game forces the players to consider two levels up, prioritize, and think combined arms. Until the armor community develops a data base or library of TDGs, armor schools and units will have to design their own TDGs.⁶

*"Coup d'oeil is the ability to look at a military situation and immediately see its essence, especially the key enemy weakness or weaknesses which, if exploited, can lead to a decision."*⁷

Why conduct TDG training?

For those on the front line, training their units for combat, TDGs can augment existing training techniques. Here are ten reasons why armored units should conduct TDG training on a regular basis:

- Practice makes perfect. TDGs enable our junior leaders to sharpen their warfighting skills on a daily basis. Junior leaders can hone essential skills such as battlefield judgment, situational awareness, and intuitive and analytical decision-making by doing TDGs on a regular basis. Soldiers should play TDGs every day in garrison.

- TDGs are efficient. Although not a substitute for field exercises or other training techniques, TDGs are inexpensive and use few resources, yet their payoff can be extremely beneficial. Junior leaders can practice tactical thinking and combined arms at all levels with little expenditure of resources. At TBS, second lieutenants played games requiring them to make decisions from the standpoint of widely differing roles, from TOW platoon leaders to mechanized-infantry company commanders to tank battalion commanders.

- TDGs are effective. TDG training on a regular basis develops imagination and creativity, encourages initiative and action, and makes our junior leaders familiar with making tough decisions under pressure.

- TDGs improve implicit communication skills. TDGs teach leaders how their subordinates think and allow leaders to teach their subordinates how they think. Implicit communication is essential to success on the battlefield, and

TDG training helps foster this. Imagine a company commander issuing and critiquing a TDG with his lieutenants. In an extremely short period, he will know how his men think, and they will learn how he thinks.⁸ This is vital to a junior leader's understanding of commander's intent.

- TDGs make us better communicators. Junior leaders "issue" their solutions to the TDG as a frag order. This practice is invaluable to ensuring clear and concise orders under pressure. The moderator can then ask questions of the other players to see if the orders were clear.

- TDGs make us better tactical thinkers, both intuitively and analytically. We make decisions both intuitively and analytically and TDGs, especially during the critique, force us to practice both. This is important, especially during Military Operations Other Than War where junior leaders must make split-second tactical decisions that can have strategic consequences. TDGs allow us to put our junior leaders into these difficult situations over and over again before they have to do it for real.

- TDGs make us better tacticians. Every game forces us to think about and mentally execute tactics.⁹ Most training at the company level focuses on techniques and procedures. TDGs can help fill this gap concerning the lack of tactics training below the company level.

- TDGs provide an excellent means to mentor and teach subordinate leaders. Company commanders, platoon leaders and NCOs are mentors, and TDGs provide an outstanding forum to discuss and teach tactics.

- TDGs allow us and our subordinates to practice warfighting two levels up. Tank commanders can fight companies, platoon leaders can fight battalions, and company commanders can fight brigades in a TDG.

- TDG training makes sense. Tactical thinking and decision-making are vital components of successful execution on the battlefield. TDG training on a regular basis will significantly enhance these essential skills, and thus better prepare our junior leaders for the rigors of combat decision-making. It just makes sense for the armored force to start integrating them into training.

"Nine-tenths of tactics are certain and taught in books; but the irrational tenth is like the kingfisher flashing across the pool and that is the test of

*generals. It can only be ensured by instinct, sharpened by thought practicing the stroke so often that at the crisis it is as natural as a reflex."*¹⁰

TDG Training and the Armored Force

How does the armor force integrate TDG training? First and foremost, the Armor School in its courses — AOAC, AOB, and ANCOC — should start using them. Instructors should supplement their classes with TDGs throughout. TDGs are a great tool to introduce tactical concepts, promote discussion of tactics, and drive home teaching points. As we learned at TBS, lectures that integrate TDGs are more effective because TDGs make the classes more interactive and compelling. Finally, by using TDGs, captains, lieutenants, and future platoon sergeants will return to their units armed with a new tool to use in training *their* subordinates. The Primary Leadership Development Courses, Basic Noncommissioned Officer Courses, and local NCO academies should also try TDG training. NCOs must also think two levels up, be used to making decisions under pressure, and be tactically competent across the combined arms' spectrum. TDGs will make them better NCOs. Finally, the Army Internet Home Page should add a TDG site to allow armor leaders to download and post TDGs for training.

*"The art of war requires the intuitive ability to grasp the essence of a unique battlefield situation, the creative ability to devise a practical solution, and the strength of purpose to execute the act."*¹¹

Conclusion

TDG training should become an integral part of how the armor force prepares to fight. Now, more than ever, we must arm our NCOs and company grade officers with effective decision-making skills that will enable them to make timely decisions despite friction and uncertainty. TDG training is a proven, cost effective, and efficient way to make this happen. Only through practice can we improve, and TDGs enable us to practice warfighting every day. Do not, however, take this author's word for it. Design a TDG; play it with your subordinates; then make your own judgment on the effectiveness of this training tool. Patton summed it up best when he stated: "A good plan violently executed *now* is better than a perfect plan next week."¹² TDG training reinforces this mentality in our junior lead-

For TDG Solutions, turn to Page 42.

ers better than any other training tool. It is time for the armor force to “violently execute now” some TDG training as it prepares its junior leaders for the rigors of combat in the 21st Century.

Notes

¹FMFM1-3, *Tactics* (Washington: U.S. Marine Corps, 1991), p. 4.

²Major Kukuck, AOAC Instructor.

³Gudmundsson, Bruce, “A Short History of TDGs,” *The Marine Corps Gazette*, April 1992, p. 65.

⁴From conversation with COL M. Wyly, USMC (Ret.) on 27 Jun 96.

⁵*Mastering Tactics*, published by the Marine Corps’ Association and *The Marine Corps Gazette’s* monthly TDG are great places to start.

⁶Major John Schmitt’s article, “Designing Good TDGs,” published in the May 1996 issue of *The Marine Corps Gazette* is an excellent guide for unit leaders to use.

⁷FMFM1-3, p. 87.

⁸From conversation with COL Wyly.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰T.E. Lawrence, “The Science of Guerrilla Warfare,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 13th edition (New York: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1926) intro.

¹¹FMFM1-1, *Warfighting* (Washington: U.S. Marine Corps, 1989), p. 15.

¹²George S. Patton, Jr., *War as I Knew It* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), p. 354.

Captain James D. Gonsalves was commissioned from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1989. He served as a tank platoon commander, AT (TOW) company XO, scout platoon commander, and H&S Company XO with the 3d Tank Battalion, 1st Marine Division, in 29 Palms, Calif. He then served as a tactics instructor at The Basic School in Quantico, Va. Upon graduation from AOAC and CLC, he reported to the 2d Marine Division.